Speech for the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Vic Toews, Q.C.

Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police
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St· John's, Newfoundland and Labrador

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Introduction

Thank you, Chief [Jack] Beaton, for your kind introduction.

I am very pleased to be back here in St. John's.

I appreciate the invitation, and I am proud to honour members of the police services who strive to improve our communities through hard work and dedication.

As Canada's Minister of Justice and Attorney General, I have the privilege of being given a chance to view the big picture when it comes to crime and our justice system. I also have enormous respect for the work of our police officers, acting as our front line in protecting our homes and our streets.

They see how much the nature of crime in Canada has changed over the years. And with that information, they are improving their ability to respond to crime. They are also in a good position to come up with the solutions we need to deal with youth who may commit more serious crimes in the future.

Among our many fine police officers who work with youth at risk, some truly stand out.

When faced with youths who come into the justice system, or who are at risk of doing so, these individuals have come up with effective and innovative ways to resolve the conflict. In this way, they are helping create safer and healthier communities across Canada.

So I am especially pleased to recognize those officers who have excelled in their work with youth in our many communities by helping to present, in conjunction with the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, the Minister of Justice National Youth Policing Awards.

The Challenge of Youth Justice

Dealing with the needs of youth in the justice system is indeed a challenge. And these officers must be commended for the way they work with our young people—a vital and vulnerable section of our society—and help them turn their lives around.

By reaching out to youth at risk when they have just entered the criminal justice system, we can offer support that can help them make the right choices and help them stand firmly against factors that may lead them down the wrong path.

Responding to the problem of youth crime can be a significant challenge. Police officers must, of course, ensure that youth in the justice system are held accountable to the community and to society for their actions. At the same time, youth at risk need guidance and support to keep them from re-offending. This can best be done through effective and timely interventions that focus on changing behaviour.

There is also the importance of respecting cultural differences within communities—which has been the particular challenge of several of our award winners.

To have a successful youth justice system we must take all these factors into account. And when someone does this job particularly well, that accomplishment should be celebrated.

The Award Winners

The winners of the Minister of Justice National Youth Policing Awards are selected based on how they work to rehabilitate and reintegrate young people in conflict with the law back into society, and the measures they take to work outside the formal court process where appropriate. The selection committee also looks for initiatives that allow members of the community at large to participate more fully in the youth justice system.

You'll see in the upcoming video how tonight's award winners have met these criteria. First, though, I'd like to take a minute to briefly mention their accomplishments:

- Our Honourable Mentions go to Constable Terri Hazell for facilitating the York Regional Police's strategic approach to youth crime, and Constable John McKinnon for engaging with youth in residential care facilities in the Halifax region;
- The Certificate of Distinction goes to Sergeant Robert Thirkill and Constable Grant Dokis for developing a referral service and mentoring program as part of the Greater Sudbury Police Service's Aboriginal Strategy; and
- The overall winners for 2005 are Sergeant Jim McEntegart, Constables Sandy Goudie, Geoff Pittman and Gavin Moore, and Clara Winters, for their work with Community Justice Forums in the Inuit community of Hopedale, in Labrador.

From these brief remarks, you can appreciate the diversity and broad-ranging needs of the communities where these award winners serve. But what they have in common is their strong commitment to youth and to their communities. Many have even devoted countless hours of their own personal time to develop and implement these projects.

These outstanding individuals also work with youth over the longer term—they are helping them to understand the impact of their actions on their own family, the victims and their families, and the community as a whole. They deal with the whole person, and not just the crime.

They have also reached out to partners—community organizations, government agencies or, in the case of the Hopedale program, ordinary people trained as facilitators.

In fact, police organizations across our country are involving partners in addressing youth justice-related issues. They are taking the lead in pulling together families and community agencies in order to provide hope and opportunity for our youth and end the cycle of violence. We all benefit from their commitment and hard work.

Partners in Tackling Crime

These exemplary police officers and community members are committed to their work because they know they can make a difference in tackling crime. That is what Canadians want from their police, and that is also one of the forces that drives our Government.

We came into power committed to five priorities, one of which was getting tough on crime. Part of meeting that commitment to tackling crime is preventing youths from committing crimes. I am working closely with my colleague, the Minister of Public Safety, Stockwell Day, to keep youth at risk from succumbing to the culture of guns, gangs and drugs.

Our Government recently announced funding of $20 million to support community-based programs that can provide youth at risk with positive opportunities and help them make good choices.

These types of crime prevention programs are important, and they work. But they work only if the gunmen and drug dealers who put youth at risk are taken off the streets first. And we have already made significant changes to how crimes and criminals are treated in this country.

This spring, we introduced five new bills that will make our communities safer.

We proposed reforms to our laws on conditional sentencing, so people who commit serious and violent crime will serve their time behind bars—not at home or in the community.

We introduced our Mandatory Minimum Penalties Bill to send a clear message that using guns to commit crimes will not be tolerated.

Our Government has moved to strengthen our National DNA Data Bank legislation to help our police identify the guilty and exonerate the innocent.

We have also introduced new legislation to increase the maximum penalties for offences that involve street racing, a reckless and dangerous act that kills all too often.

And finally, we introduced legislative proposals that would raise the age at which youth can consent to sexual activity from 14 to 16 years. This legislation targets those who sexually prey upon some of society's most vulnerable individuals.

To back up these commitments, we provided funding in the 2006 Budget to begin recruiting more RCMP personnel and federal prosecutors, to expand the RCMP Training Academy, and to further strengthen the National DNA Data Bank.

Our approach is meant to be tough. At the same time, it's balanced. Our approach respects the rights of the accused but does not allow their rights to take precedence over community safety .

By breaking the back of the culture of guns, gangs and drugs, we are sending the message to youth—and to all Canadians—that we won't tolerate these threats to our streets and to our communities.

Conclusion

We can't make the vision of a safer, more secure country a reality without the support of our partners—among all levels of government, citizen groups and police officers. Our police officers are on the front line, serving in our neighbourhoods so that we can all feel safe and secure walking on our streets.

And many of you go above and beyond the call of duty to find new and novel ways to help young people resist the lure of crime, and make the right choices in their lives.

I would like to thank the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police for continuing to be a valuable partner in the Minister of Justice National Youth Policing Awards, and in serving and protecting all Canadians.

Once again, I'd like to congratulate the award winners, and say how proud I am of all those who are making a difference with youth at risk.

These winners show how all of use can use our different strengths and experiences to make meaningful progress in reducing crime in this country, and among our youth.

Thank you.

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